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Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2004

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Mu'taz **Hyassat**

IV. Translation and interpretation-related matters

A. Language services posts

1. At its 459th and 460th meetings, on 8 September 2004, the Committee on Conferences considered paragraphs 47 to 49 of the report of the Secretary-General on pattern of conferences (A/59/159) concerning the vacancy situation in language services posts together with supplementary tables on the vacancy situation at the four duty stations updated to 31 August 2004 and a chart on the use of short-term staff at Headquarters in 2002 and 2003.

2. The Committee was informed that the vacancy rate in translation ranged from 7.79 per cent at Geneva to 25 per cent at Nairobi, while the vacancy rate in interpretation ranged from 3.65 per cent at Geneva to 26.3 per cent at Nairobi. The high rates were due in part to a large number of retirements in recent years, and more were anticipated. The Secretariat hoped to fill the posts expeditiously and then to begin the considerable task of training and assimilating the large number of new staff into the work force.

Discussion

3. Deep concern was expressed about the persistent vacancies in language service posts at Headquarters and, more particularly, at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. The efforts to fill all vacancies were noted, but progress was seen to be slower than expected, and it was suggested that the Secretary-General should be requested to expedite the process and report on it through the Committee on Conferences to the General Assembly at its sixtieth session. It was said that it was surprising that there was a high vacancy rate in the Chinese Translation Service at Headquarters and in Geneva in view of the large roster available. Reference was made to paragraph 49 of the report concerning personnel movements, and the view

was expressed that the General Assembly did not intend for mobility transfers to apply to language staff, since each duty station had its particular linguistic needs and specialized topics. On the other hand, transfer for the sake of knowledge-sharing on a short-term basis could be valuable. The Secretariat pointed out that there was not currently a General Assembly resolution in effect that exempted language staff from the five-year mobility requirement. The view was expressed that such an exemption might be considered.

4. In answering a concern about the length of time required for recruitment from competitive exams, it was explained that the successful candidates, once selected, would have to go through the normal recruitment procedures, which were time-consuming. Representatives of the Secretariat explained some of the problems entailed in obtaining an adequate roster from language examinations and in competing with other international organizations for a fairly small pool of qualified translators and interpreters. A Russian national training programme for translators and interpreters specializing in work for international organizations was described.

5. With regard to short-term staff, a number of delegations expressed concern that the exclusive use of locally recruited staff for the sake of financial savings might result in lower quality if staff were not current with the latest terminology in countries where their target language was spoken. The practice of hiring successful candidates from the roster for short-term assignments was valuable to allow them to gain experience with United Nations work, and it would certainly be a better option than to resort to translation agencies. It was noted that some language services appeared to recruit far more non-local staff than others. Problems in the quality of translations in several languages had been noted during peak periods, either because of the heavy use of short-term staff or simply because of the pressure of tight deadlines.

6. Representatives of the Secretariat explained that for short-term translation and interpretation assignments locally recruited staff were preferred to non-locally recruited staff for reasons of cost and availability, provided the same quality criteria were met. Often retired staff were used because they could be immediately productive without training. In the selection of local or non-local staff, the same criteria were used. Their qualifications, language combinations and expertise were taken into consideration. Quality control measures within the language services were applied to local and non-local staff alike. Several delegations stressed the importance of the basic principles of the Organization, including multilingualism and common recruitment policies and working conditions for all language services. Savings achieved by recruiting locally were not justified if quality suffered. Others felt that it was sensible to hire locally at less expense only if standards of quality were maintained; indeed, more might be done to enlarge the pool of locally available short-term staff by helping them to hone their skills.

7. In answer to a question, it was explained that at the current time the slotting system was providing indicative guidance on temporary assistance requirements.

8. In answer to questions concerning off-site translation, representatives of the Secretariat explained that such translation would differ from contractual translation, which had long been in use for documents with longer deadlines and for which contractors were paid by the word. The model of off-site work might potentially apply to many other departments as well, and the Office of Human Resources

Management had been asked to consider what conditions would apply to such an employment arrangement.

B. Informational meetings

9. At its 460th meeting, on 8 September, the Committee considered paragraphs 50 and 51 of the report of the Secretary-General concerning informational meetings to brief Member States on the terminology used and to consult with them on the improvement of the language services. The Department also planned to set up a web site to receive comments on an ongoing basis.

Discussion

10. Strong support was expressed for the holding of the informational meetings, which were found to be useful and informative. It was proposed that they be held twice a year for each language rather than once a year and that they be provided with interpretation services as needed on an as-available basis. Pending the establishment of the contact web site, the representative of the Secretariat suggested that members send their comments through the contact address on e-Meets.